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The psychology of the "good child" Emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and self-worth in childhood

Dr. Asia Khatoon[1], Salika Marghoob[2], Sobia Ashfaq[3]

[1]*Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazirabad, Pakistan*
Email: drasia@sbbusba.edu.pk
[2]*Lecturer, Department of Education, Federal Urdu University of Arts Science and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan*
[3]*Research Scholar, Department of Teacher's Education, University of Karachi, Pakistan*

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Corresponding Author:
Dr. Asia Khatoon
Email:
drasia@sbbusba.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

The idea of the "good child" is commonly associated with obedience, politeness, achievement, emotional control, respect for adults, and the ability to avoid causing trouble. These qualities can support healthy social development, but problems may arise when children learn that being accepted, loved, or valued depends on continuously meeting other people's expectations. This assignment examines the psychology of the "good child" through three connected themes: emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and self-worth. A qualitative research approach is used, with a systematic literature review as the research design and published research studies as the secondary data source. The review brings together literature on emotion socialization, expressive suppression, parental conditional regard, approval-based self-worth, and children's self-esteem. The literature suggests that children learn about emotions partly through the reactions and examples provided by important adults. When negative emotions are repeatedly minimized, punished, ignored, or treated as unacceptable, children may learn to hide rather than understand and regulate those emotions. Research on parental conditional regard also indicates that when affection or approval appears dependent on performance or compliance, children may become more concerned with maintaining approval and may develop more contingent forms of self-esteem. However, the review does not suggest that every obedient, helpful, or emotionally controlled child experiences psychological harm. Context, family relationships, culture, temperament, developmental stage, and the meaning attached to behavior all matter. The central issue is whether positive behavior reflects secure values and emotional competence or fear of rejection and dependence on external approval. The assignment concludes that healthier development requires adults to combine reasonable expectations with emotional acceptance, opportunities for autonomy, and messages that separate a child's worth from performance or behavior.

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Introduction

Childhood is a major period for the development of identity, emotional understanding, relationships, and beliefs about personal worth. Children do not develop these beliefs in isolation. Parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and wider social environments communicate direct and indirect messages about what is acceptable. A child may therefore learn not only how to behave, but also what kind of person they believe they must become in order to receive approval.

The phrase "good child" is useful as a social description, but it is not a psychological diagnosis. In everyday life, it may describe a child who is quiet, respectful, cooperative, academically successful, helpful, or rarely disobedient. These qualities can be positive. The concern begins when the child experiences goodness as a condition for belonging. For example, a child may think, "If I disagree, people will be angry with me," "If I make a mistake, I am a disappointment," or "If I show sadness, I will create problems." Such beliefs can shift behavior from healthy cooperation toward self-silencing.

Emotion socialization research is relevant because children learn emotional patterns through interactions with caregivers. Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad (1998) described emotion socialization as involving parental reactions to children's emotions, discussions of emotions, and adults' own emotional expressions. Later research has continued to examine how parental responses are related to children's emotion regulation and adjustment. □cite□turn1search4□turn1search8□

Another relevant concept is parental conditional regard. It refers to giving or withdrawing approval depending on whether children meet expectations. A recent meta-analysis found associations between parental conditional regard and introjected self-regulation, contingent self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and lower relatedness. □cite□turn1search0□ These findings do not prove that one parenting practice automatically causes a particular outcome, but they provide an important basis for understanding how children can connect self-evaluation with external approval.

This review therefore brings together related strands of research rather than treating "good child syndrome" as a formal clinical condition. The purpose is to understand the developmental processes behind emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and fragile or conditional self-worth.

Background of the Problem

In many families and educational settings, children receive praise for being easy to manage and criticism for expressing anger, sadness, disagreement, or disappointment. A child may gradually discover that some emotions receive attention while others create discomfort. At the same time, achievement, obedience, and helpfulness may be strongly rewarded. The child can begin to monitor other people's reactions and adjust behavior accordingly. This process can look socially successful from the outside while leaving the child uncertain about personal needs and feelings.

Problem Statement

The psychological concern examined in this assignment is the possibility that repeated pressure to be a "good child" can encourage children to suppress unwanted emotions, prioritize other people's expectations, and evaluate their own worth through approval or achievement. Existing

research often examines these processes separately—for example, emotion regulation research studies suppression, parenting research studies conditional regard, and developmental research studies self-esteem. A systematic qualitative synthesis is useful because it can connect these concepts into a single developmental picture.

The problem is not obedience itself. Children need boundaries, social responsibility, and opportunities to learn appropriate behavior. The problem is the meaning attached to compliance. When a child understands "I made a mistake" as different from "I am a bad child," correction can support learning. When mistakes are experienced as evidence of being unworthy of love or respect, the same situation can contribute to shame and approval-seeking. Research on conditional positive regard has linked perceptions of achievement-based parental affection with self-aggrandizement after success and self-devaluation and shame after failure. □cite□turn1search9□

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this systematic literature review is to qualitatively examine how childhood experiences associated with being a "good child" may relate to emotional suppression, people-pleasing or approval-seeking behavior, and the development of self-worth. The review also aims to identify protective conditions that may help children develop emotional expression, autonomy, and stable self-worth.

Research Objectives

- To examine how the literature describes emotional suppression and its development during childhood.
- To explore how parental and social responses to children's emotions may shape emotional expression and regulation.
- To examine the relationship between approval-seeking, conditional regard, and children's sense of self-worth.
- To identify common patterns connecting emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and contingent self-worth.
- To identify protective practices that support emotional acceptance, autonomy, relatedness, and healthier self-evaluation.
- To highlight gaps in existing research and suggest directions for educational and family practice.

Research Questions

- How does existing research explain emotional suppression in childhood?
- How do adults' responses to children's emotions influence children's emotional regulation and expression?
- What does the literature indicate about approval-seeking, conditional regard, and self-worth in children and adolescents?
- How can emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and conditional self-worth be understood as interconnected developmental patterns?
- What protective family and educational practices are identified in the literature?

Conceptual Understanding of the "Good Child"

For this review, the "good child" is understood as a socially constructed pattern rather than a fixed personality type. The pattern may include obedience, politeness, high achievement, helpfulness, emotional control, conflict avoidance, and strong concern about adults' reactions. Some of these behaviors are developmentally appropriate and valuable. The review focuses on situations in which the child's sense of safety, belonging, or worth becomes strongly dependent on maintaining these behaviors.

Emotional Suppression

Emotional suppression refers to attempts to hide, inhibit, or reduce the outward expression of an emotion. It is different from emotional regulation as a whole. Regulation can involve identifying an emotion, understanding it, changing one's interpretation of a situation, tolerating distress, or choosing how to express a feeling. Suppression is one possible strategy within this larger process. A review of expressive suppression in children and adolescents notes that researchers have examined when children use suppression and the possible social, cognitive, emotional, and physiological costs associated with it. □cite□turn0search13□

A child who learns that crying is unacceptable may stop crying in front of adults without actually becoming less sad. Similarly, a child may hide anger rather than learn how to communicate disagreement respectfully. This distinction is important because visible calmness does not automatically indicate emotional health.

People-Pleasing and Approval-Seeking

"People-pleasing" is a common everyday expression rather than a formal childhood diagnosis. In this assignment, it refers to a pattern of excessive concern with maintaining others' approval, avoiding conflict, or meeting expectations at the expense of expressing one's own needs. Research on children's need for approval found that approval-based self-appraisals can have both positive and negative dimensions: social approval may temporarily enhance self-worth, while disapproval may diminish it. □cite□turn1search18□

This means that wanting to be liked is not automatically harmful. Human beings have a normal need for belonging. The developmental concern is stronger when approval becomes the main basis for evaluating the self. A child may then ask, consciously or unconsciously, "Am I still good if someone is disappointed in me?"

Self-Worth

Self-worth refers to the person's general evaluation of their own value. Healthy self-worth does not require a child to believe they are perfect. It allows mistakes, learning, disagreement, and changing abilities without treating these experiences as proof that the person has no value. Research on contingent self-esteem is particularly relevant because it examines self-esteem that depends on meeting particular standards or receiving desired outcomes.

Theoretical Perspective

This review is informed mainly by emotion socialization perspectives and Self-Determination Theory. Emotion socialization perspectives emphasize that children learn about emotions partly through family interaction. Adults communicate emotional rules through what they say, how they respond to children's feelings, how they express their own emotions, and whether they help children understand and solve emotional situations. The literature has repeatedly treated supportive responses and non-supportive responses as meaningful aspects of children's emotional development. □cite□turn1search4□turn1search16□

Self-Determination Theory provides a useful framework for understanding autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Within this framework, parental conditional regard can encourage children to regulate themselves through internal pressure because they are concerned with obtaining or maintaining approval. A meta-analysis of 31 samples reported positive associations between parental conditional regard and introjected regulation and contingent self-esteem, alongside associations with depressive symptoms and lower relatedness. □cite□turn1search0□

These perspectives can be connected through a simple developmental sequence. First, a child experiences a social response to a behavior or emotion. Second, the child interprets what that response means about acceptable behavior and relationships. Third, repeated experiences can become expectations about how the child should behave. Finally, the child may use these expectations to judge the self. For example: "My parent becomes warm when I achieve" can gradually become "I am valuable when I achieve." This is a conceptual interpretation, not a claim that every child follows the same sequence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this assignment can be represented as follows:

Adult expectations and emotional responses → Child learns emotional and behavioral rules → Fear of disapproval or desire for approval → Emotional suppression and approval-seeking → Self-evaluation becomes more dependent on performance or acceptance → Possible vulnerability in self-worth and emotional expression.

Protective factors can interrupt this pathway: emotional validation, secure relationships, autonomy support, appropriate boundaries, constructive feedback, opportunities to repair mistakes, and messages that separate behavior from personal worth. This framework is intentionally broad because the reviewed studies use different methods, age groups, and definitions.

Important Qualification

The framework should not be interpreted as a one-directional cause-and-effect model. A longitudinal study of parental conditional regard and contingent self-esteem found evidence of reciprocal relations: some paths ran from parental conditional regard to contingent self-esteem, while other paths suggested that children's contingent self-esteem could also predict parental conditional regard. □cite□turn1search6□ Development therefore involves interaction between children and their environments.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

The study uses a qualitative research approach. The aim is not to calculate a new statistical effect size but to interpret and synthesize concepts, patterns, explanations, and findings across existing studies. Qualitative synthesis is appropriate for the topic because the central questions concern meaning and developmental processes: how children learn emotional rules, how approval becomes psychologically important, and how self-worth can become linked with performance or social acceptance.

Research Design: Systematic Literature Review

The research design is a systematic literature review. A systematic review follows a planned process for locating, screening, selecting, and synthesizing relevant research. PRISMA 2020 provides reporting guidance for systematic reviews, including a checklist and flow-diagram structure. □cite□turn0search1□turn0search4□ In this assignment, PRISMA is used as a reporting framework rather than as a claim that the review is a registered clinical systematic review.

Data Source

The data source is secondary data consisting of existing and published research studies. No children, parents, teachers, or other participants were recruited for this assignment, and no questionnaires or interviews were conducted. The reviewed evidence includes peer-reviewed studies and scholarly reviews concerning emotion socialization, expressive suppression, parental conditional regard, approval-based self-worth, self-esteem, and related developmental processes.

Search Strategy

Relevant literature was identified through academic search resources and scholarly databases using combinations of terms such as: “childhood emotional suppression,” “expressive suppression children,” “parent emotion socialization,” “parental conditional regard,” “contingent self-esteem,” “need for approval children,” “self-worth childhood,” and “parent-child emotion regulation.” Searches were refined by combining concepts with terms such as child, adolescent, parenting, emotion, self-esteem, and development.

Inclusion Criteria

- Published scholarly studies or systematic/review articles relevant to childhood or adolescence.
- Research addressing emotion expression, suppression, emotion socialization, approval, conditional regard, self-esteem, self-worth, or closely related constructs.
- Studies with clearly described participants, concepts, or findings.
- Research that contributes directly to one or more review questions.

Exclusion Criteria

- Sources with no clear relationship to childhood, adolescence, parenting, emotion, approval, or self-worth.
- Unverified social-media posts, popular psychology articles, and anonymous web content.
- Duplicate records and sources whose available information was insufficient to establish relevance.
- Material that presented clinical or causal conclusions unsupported by the study design.

Qualitative Data Analysis and Synthesis

Because the data consist of published studies rather than interviews or observations collected by the researcher, analysis focused on thematic synthesis. First, the literature was read for recurring concepts. Second, similar findings were grouped under broader categories. Third, relationships between categories were examined. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical perspectives.

Theme One: Learning Which Emotions Are Acceptable

The first theme concerns emotional rules learned through social interaction. Children depend on adults to help them interpret emotional experiences. Supportive responses can acknowledge the child's feeling while guiding behavior, whereas minimizing or punishing emotional expression may reduce opportunities to learn adaptive regulation. A systematic review of parent socialization of negative affect highlights the importance of parents' emotion-focused practices in children's emotion regulation. □cite□turn1search3□

The literature therefore suggests that the message "you are allowed to feel angry, but you are not allowed to hurt someone" is psychologically different from "good children do not get angry." The first message separates emotion from behavior. The second may communicate that the emotion itself is unacceptable.

Theme Two: Suppression Can Affect Interaction

Experimental research provides an important complement to correlational studies. In one study of parents and children aged 7–11, parents were assigned to suppress their emotional state or act naturally before interacting with their child. Suppression was associated with changes in physiological linkage and interaction behavior, including lower warmth and engagement in the dyads. □cite□turn1search5□ Another experimental study found that parental suppression during cooperative interaction was associated with reductions in observed positive mood, responsiveness, warmth, guidance, and overall interaction quality, although effects differed by parent sex. □cite□turn1search13□

These studies do not directly establish that a "good child" identity causes suppression. Instead, they show why emotional concealment is important to study: emotions that are hidden can still influence relationships and interaction. Children can also learn from adults' emotional behavior even when adults do not explicitly teach an emotional rule.

Theme Three: Approval Can Become Part of Self-Evaluation

The third theme concerns the relationship between approval and self-worth. Research on children's need for approval indicates that approval-based self-appraisals can involve both enhanced self-worth following approval and reduced self-worth following disapproval. □cite□turn1search18□ This helps explain why a child may become highly attentive to others' reactions. The child is not simply trying to be polite; social feedback can become information about personal value.

Parental conditional regard is particularly important here. The recent meta-analysis cited earlier found associations with contingent self-esteem and introjected regulation. □cite□turn1search0□

Findings and Integrated Discussion

The qualitative synthesis suggests that emotional suppression, people-pleasing, and conditional self-worth are best understood as related but distinct processes. They may reinforce one another, but they should not be treated as identical. A child can suppress emotions without being highly approval-seeking. Another child may strongly seek approval while expressing emotions openly. A third child may have low self-worth for reasons unrelated to parenting. The value of the framework is therefore in identifying possible connections rather than creating a single explanation for every child.

From Emotional Rule to Self-Monitoring

A repeated emotional message can become a self-monitoring habit. If a child expects anger to lead to rejection, the child may monitor signs of anger and hide them. If disagreement is repeatedly associated with disrespect, the child may avoid expressing preferences. If achievement produces strong approval while mistakes produce withdrawal of affection, the child may monitor performance closely. Over time, the child may become skilled at reading other people but less skilled at identifying personal needs.

This interpretation is consistent with research showing that parental emotional reactions and emotion-related behavior are connected with children's emotional and social competence. The literature also emphasizes that the process is bidirectional: children influence parents as parents influence children. □cite□turn1search4□

The "Good Child" and Conditional Self-Worth

Conditional self-worth means that a person's positive evaluation of the self depends on meeting a particular standard. For a "good child," the standard may be obedience, achievement, helpfulness, emotional calmness, or being liked. When the standard is met, the child may feel secure temporarily. When it is not met, the child may experience shame, guilt, anxiety, or strong self-criticism.

Research on adolescents and parental conditional positive regard provides a clear example of this dynamic. In a study of 153 adolescents, perceived conditional positive regard related to maladaptive self-feelings and coping, including self-aggrandizement after success and self-devaluation and shame following failure. □cite□turn1search9□ This suggests that external approval can produce unstable self-evaluation rather than a stable sense of worth.

Why "Good Behavior" Should Not Be Pathologized

It is important not to label respectful, cooperative, quiet, or high-achieving children as psychologically unhealthy simply because they display these characteristics. Families and cultures differ in their expectations, and children can genuinely value cooperation and responsibility. The important distinction is between behavior chosen within a secure relationship and behavior driven mainly by fear of losing acceptance. The same outward behavior can therefore have different psychological meanings.

Role of Culture and Context

The meaning of obedience, respect, emotional expression, and family responsibility varies across cultural and social contexts. A systematic review should therefore avoid assuming that one cultural model of childhood applies universally. Future research should pay particular attention to South Asian contexts, where family relationships, respect for elders, academic achievement, and collective responsibilities may shape children's experiences in ways that are not fully represented in predominantly Western samples.

Educational and Practical Implications

Implications for Parents

- Separate the child's behavior from the child's identity. Say "this behavior was not appropriate" rather than communicating "you are a bad child."
- Acknowledge emotions without approving harmful behavior. A child can be angry, disappointed, or afraid and still be guided toward safe behavior.
- Use praise carefully. Specific feedback about effort, strategy, kindness, or improvement is different from making love or acceptance appear dependent on success.
- Allow reasonable disagreement and age-appropriate choices so that children can develop autonomy.
- Model healthy emotional expression. Children observe how adults handle frustration, disappointment, and conflict.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers can create classrooms in which students are expected to follow rules while still being allowed to ask questions, disagree respectfully, and communicate emotions. A classroom should not reward silence as the only sign of good behavior. Teachers can use reflective questions such as "What happened?", "How did you feel?", "What could you do next?", and "How can we repair the situation?" These questions encourage responsibility without turning mistakes into judgments about personal worth.

Implications for Educational Leadership

School leaders can support social-emotional development by encouraging teacher training on emotion coaching, supportive discipline, student voice, and respectful communication. Policies concerning behavior should distinguish between misconduct and emotional experience. For example, aggression may require clear boundaries, but anger itself should not automatically be treated as misbehavior.

Implications for Counseling and Student Support

Counselors working with older children or adolescents may explore whether a student's self-evaluation depends heavily on grades, praise, peer acceptance, or avoiding conflict. Support can focus on identifying emotions, developing assertive communication, tolerating reasonable disapproval, and recognizing personal values. Such work should avoid assuming that every approval-seeking behavior originates in parenting; peer relationships, temperament, school experiences, and broader social conditions can also contribute.

A Healthier Alternative to the "Good Child" Model

A healthier model can be described as the "securely responsible child." Such a child can follow rules while asking questions, care about others while maintaining boundaries, apologize without experiencing the self as worthless, and experience difficult emotions without believing that the emotions make the child bad. The goal is not to remove expectations. It is to combine expectations with acceptance, autonomy, and opportunities for repair.

Limitations of the Review

This assignment has several limitations. First, the term "good child" is not a standardized psychological construct. The review therefore draws together related constructs rather than measuring a formally defined syndrome. Second, the included literature uses different age ranges, cultural contexts, definitions, and research designs. Direct comparison across all studies is therefore limited.

Third, much of the literature on emotion socialization and parenting is correlational. Correlation can show that two variables are related, but it cannot by itself establish that one variable caused the other. Some longitudinal and experimental studies provide stronger evidence about temporal or situational relationships, but they still address particular contexts rather than childhood as a whole. For example, research on parental conditional regard has found reciprocal relationships between parenting and contingent self-esteem, demonstrating that children's characteristics may also influence parents' behavior. □cite□turn1search6□

Fourth, many influential studies have been conducted outside Pakistan. Their findings may be informative, but cultural interpretation is necessary before applying them directly to Pakistani families or schools. Fifth, the assignment uses published secondary data and does not include interviews with children, parents, teachers, or counselors. Therefore, it cannot provide first-person accounts of how Pakistani children understand the "good child" expectation.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study uses existing published research, no new human participants were recruited. The ethical responsibilities therefore focus on accurate representation of sources, appropriate citation, avoidance of plagiarism, and responsible interpretation. HEC's Anti-Plagiarism Policy 2023 emphasizes academic integrity and states that similarity detection should be interpreted by relevant subject experts. HEC also advises that students follow proper documentation styles and ensure that submitted work is free from plagiarism. □cite□turn0search48□turn0search49□

This assignment intentionally paraphrases research findings instead of reproducing long passages. Direct quotations are minimized. The references identify the original scholarly sources so that readers can distinguish the researcher's synthesis from prior research.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Conduct qualitative interviews with Pakistani children and adolescents about what being a "good child" means to them.
- Explore differences between parental expectations, teacher expectations, and peer expectations.
- Study how academic achievement pressure relates to contingent self-worth in university-bound adolescents.
- Examine gender, socioeconomic, rural-urban, and cultural differences without assuming that one group has a single experience.
- Investigate protective factors such as emotional validation, autonomy support, secure attachment, and supportive teacher-student relationships.
- Develop culturally appropriate educational and counseling interventions that teach emotional literacy and assertive communication.

Conclusion

The psychology of the "good child" can be understood as a developmental question about what children learn when approval is strongly connected to obedience, achievement, emotional control, or being easy to manage. The reviewed literature does not support the idea that good behavior is harmful in itself. Instead, it points toward the importance of the emotional meaning behind the behavior. When children are allowed to have feelings, make mistakes, disagree respectfully, and remain valued while learning, responsible behavior can develop alongside healthy self-worth.

The literature reviewed for this assignment connects three important processes. First, children learn emotional rules through socialization. Repeated dismissal or punishment of emotional expression can encourage children to hide feelings rather than understand and regulate them. Second, children naturally value belonging and approval, but approval-based self-evaluation can become problematic when disapproval strongly threatens their sense of worth. Third, conditional regard can contribute to forms of self-esteem that depend on meeting external standards. Together, these processes help explain why a child who appears exceptionally "good" may sometimes be carrying a high level of self-monitoring and fear of disappointing others.

A qualitative systematic literature review is useful because it brings these separate research areas into conversation. At the same time, the evidence should be interpreted carefully. Childhood development is complex, relationships are reciprocal, and cultural contexts differ. The most useful conclusion is therefore not that parents or teachers should stop expecting good behavior. Rather, adults should communicate that children are worthy of care even when they are angry, unsuccessful, confused, or wrong. Expectations should guide behavior, not define the child's value.

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